

VZCZCXRO4656
RR RUEHBC RUEHDE RUEHDH RUEHKUK RUEHROV
DE RUEHKU #1158/01 3471354
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
R 131354Z DEC 09
FM AMEMBASSY KUWAIT
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 4284
INFO RUEHEE/ARAB LEAGUE COLLECTIVE

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 KUWAIT 001158

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR NEA/ARP (JSAWYER), NEA/PPD (DBENZE, PAGNEW),
IIP/NEA/SCA (AMANDA BATT)

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [OEXC](#) [OIIP](#) [SCUL](#) [KPAO](#) [ZR](#)

SUBJECT: U.S. SPEAKER, DR. REZA ASLAN SPEAKS TO KUWAITI AUDIENCES ON
GLOBAL TRENDS IN ISLAM

REF: 11/25/09 WILLIAMS-SAWYER CLASSIFIED E-MAIL

¶1. (U) Summary: Dr. Reza Aslan, a well known Iranian-American scholar and author of several books on Islam, spoke to a diversified group of scholars, intellectuals, Islamic thinkers, officials and students from a wide range of political, economic and social backgrounds during his November 22-25 visit to Kuwait. Although his prepared speeches concentrated on global trends in Islam, Dr. Aslan answered a wide range of questions during Q&A periods and during a press roundtable discussion, dealing with other aspects of Islam, and offered his personal views of U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East. End summary.

¶2. (U) At American University of Kuwait and Kuwait University, Dr. Aslan shared his views on modern trends in Islam in the U.S. and worldwide, noting that increased literacy rates, especially among women, the availability of the internet, the presence of charismatic television figures such as Egyptian Amre Khalid, and the migration of Muslims to the U.S. and Europe, is changing traditional Islam. He asserted that "Muslim young people are easily able to access popular Islamic websites such as www.fatwaonline.com," and are therefore no longer dependent on their local Imam for advice. Although Amre Khalid, who reaches millions of people worldwide, did not receive any formal religious training whatsoever, he is able "to put his finger on the 'pulse' of the street and identify solutions and alternatives for youths, by speaking a universal language and promoting moderation and interfaith tolerance between religions." Thanks to the increasingly high literacy rates among women, Dr. Aslan asserted that, "Muslim women today have a gender neutral role in Islam as religious leaders, by taking an active part in modern interpretations of the Quran. Women are portrayed in a positive role, a role they pioneered since the early beginnings of Islam, and are now assuming this active role again."

¶3. (U) The Ambassador hosted a dinner in honor of Dr. Aslan, which was attended by a select group of Kuwaiti intellectuals, scholars and business leaders. The discussion revolved around political Islam, domestic political developments in Iran, the hot issues of the hour on the local Kuwaiti political scene and the increasing influence of government and conservative elements of society on local politics. Dr. Aslan met with officials at the Diplomatic Institute from the Kuwait Ministry of Foreign Affairs and discussed U.S. foreign policies and relations with Kuwait, Iran, Saudi Arabia and Iraq, and stability in the Gulf area in general.

¶4. (U) Press roundup: Dr. Aslan participated in a discussion with four journalists from conservative local newspapers. The discussion revolved around U.S. foreign policy in the region, Iranian domestic and regional politics, the overwhelmingly positive experience of Muslims in America and gender equality. All of the conservative newspapers present, in addition to liberal Arabic daily Al-Rai, covered the Q & A by Dr. Aslan accurately. They also noted the Embassy's statement that Dr. Aslan's views were his own and did not necessarily represent the official positions of the USG. Most of the headlines mentioned Dr. Aslan's suggestion that Kuwait, which has the trust of both Saudi Arabia and Iran, would be in a good position to act as a mediator between the two countries. His

assertion that he was personally certain that there were Iranian intelligence agents in the Gulf, while stressing that it was common practice for all governments to employ such agents, also made several headlines. None of the papers picked up Aslan's statement that he was personally certain that, contrary to information cited in the State Department's Religious Freedom report, the Kuwaiti government closely monitors Shiite mosques (Note: following the round-table, the Embassy sent a written clarification to the journalists on the State Department's position. End note).

The following short summary of the longer Al Watan article appeared in Al Watan Daily, an English language paper:

Headline: "Kuwait Can Mediate Between Iran,Saudi"

"American academic Reza Aslan stressed the efficient role that Kuwait performs in the region, and said that because of this Kuwait can act as a mediator between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Aslan, who is of Iranian origin, asserted during a meeting organized by the American Embassy in Kuwait attended by several local newspapers' editors that Iran cannot pose a threat to Arab countries since it seeks to be a powerful country that binds Muslims together. He stated that Iran is working on cementing its relationships with the GCC countries, giving as examples its commercial relationships with Oman and Dubai. He added that despite mounting tension with Saudi Arabia, Iran is attempting to be friendly with GCC countries, and eventually the rest of the Arab region. He went on to say that all countries have intelligence agents in other countries, and that it is common practice for all governments, citing that despite the unique relationship between the U.S. and Israel, Israelis often attempt to spy on America."

KUWAIT 00001158 002 OF 002

15. (U) Post would like to thank IIP and Ms. Amanda Batt for availing us with an opportunity to program a prominent American scholar and published author, Dr. Reza Aslan on a U.S. Speaker Program.

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